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German workmen in Russia

New York

[1920?]

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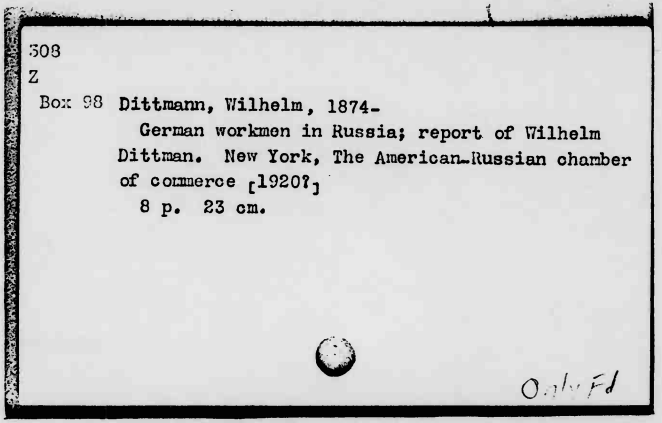

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German Workmen in Russia

REPORT OF

WILHELM DITTMANN

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GERMAN WORKMEN IN RUSSIA

THE REPORT OF WILHELM DITTMANN

[Wilhelm Dittmann, one of the most prominent members of the Independent Socialist Party in Germany, was one of the delegation which that party sent to the Second Congress of the Third International at Moscow, held during July and August, 1920. On his return he made a report on conditions in Soviet Russia and the Soviet régime which has opened the eyes of the German workmen. In the Berlin *Freiheit* of August 31 and September 1, he published an account of the experiences of the German workmen who were induced to go to Russia by the promises held out by the Bolsheviki. This illuminating report will disillusion any one who is still inclined to believe that there is a workingmen's government in Russia, or any serious attempt to promote labor welfare and prosperity. The following is a translation, slightly abridged, of Dittmann's sensational report, published in *Living Age*, Oct. 9.—Editor.]

HE who will not listen must be made to feel. How often has the warning been issued in Germany during the past year and more not to migrate to Russia under the existing conditions. Such cautions, whether issued by our party authorities or by the representative of the Soviet government in Berlin, have not been heeded, but set down as caused by enmity to Russia. Now the first contingent of German workers, who, defying these warnings migrated to Russia, has arrived there and its members are bitterly disappointed at what they have found.

As chance had it, our delegation to the Congress of the Third International at Moscow traveled from Stettin to Reval on the same steamer as these emigrants. The party had been organized by the Joint Committee of the German Emigration Societies, which has its headquarters in Leipzig, and it consisted of workingmen from Leipzig, Berlin, and Hamburg. It included altogether some 70 families who were going as land settlers to the governments of Vologda and Viatka, in North Russia, together with about 120 skilled artisans whose destination was a big machinery works at Kolomna near Moscow.

We learned later in Moscow that the land settlers, whose destination was North Russia, were stopping temporarily in Petrograd, and that probably they would change their plans and make homes near Moscow instead of in those inhospitable northern regions. We ascertained that the skilled mechanics had reached Kolomna safely, but had at once become involved in a dispute with the authorities. Part of them refused to work and wanted to return to Germany. Matters had been represented to them in Germany as very different from what they actually were. They were told that they would be employed together in a small factory, which they themselves would manage; that houses would be provided for them;

and that food was varied and abundant. None of these promises had been fulfilled. Their reception by the Russian workmen was the reverse of friendly. They were greeted with the question, whether they had come to take the bread from the mouths of the Russian workers, whether they were going to replace Russians, whom it was intended to send to the trenches at the front. When they refused to work in a factory which in their opinion was in a state of complete ruin, and in managing which they would have no voice, they were abused as counter-revolutionists by the factory administration and by the representatives of the Soviet Government.

We had planned in any case to visit the machine shops of Kolomna, and naturally were the more anxious to do so after receiving these reports. On Saturday, August 7, we journeyed by auto to this little city which is about 70 miles south of Moscow at the junction of the Moskva and the Oka rivers. It is a place of some 20,000 inhabitants. In our tour of the works, which used to have 17,000 employees and now has about 5,000, we confirmed the report that their condition left much to be desired. Tools and other findings were in very bad condition, and the machinery, which was not running, was absolutely out of order. The German mechanics who were working told us that things went frightfully slow and were badly managed. Although they were not able to do a full day's work on account of poor food and poor working facilities, one German actually accomplished as much as five Russians. The Russian employees were partly men who had been drafted by force from the villages; others were volunteers whose motive was to get the special food ration given to factory workers. No one of them showed the slightest interest in his labor; quite on the contrary there was a universal disposition to sabotage, which extended even to some of the higher employees. After working half an hour, the Russians would take a rest, spending another half hour or whole hour smoking cigarettes, chatting, and singing. Then little by little they would go back to work. This was repeated throughout the day. Consequently, the Germans found it very difficult to work with the Russians; but a few of them were willing to see the thing through. Part of them, however, refused to work under such conditions, and wanted to go home. They were bitterly indignant at the representatives of the Joint Committee of German Emigration Societies, who had persuaded them to come to Russia by misrepresentation.

We learned from the factory management committee—which consisted of a joiner, a painter, and an office clerk—that the shop council was selected by the Metal Workers' Union; that it consisted of five members, and that it had nothing to do with the management of the works. Its functions were to protect the rights of the workers, to maintain discipline among them, to recruit additional labor when necessary in the villages, and to educate and agitate among the men. The working hours were from 8.30 a. m. to 1.30 p. m. and from 3 p. m. to 5 p. m. The German workers received larger rations than the Russians; one and one quarter pounds of bread, one-quarter pound of meat, and three-eighths of a pound of coarse millet meal daily. In addition, the whole party of 120 men received 16 poods of green vegetables, mostly beets and turnips. They had coffee in the

morning and the evening, salt, sugar, tobacco, and soap powder. They did their own cooking and baking. The basic wage for unskilled workers was ten rubles per hour, rising to 15.75 rubles for skilled workers. Since June 1 a bonus of 50 per cent. has been paid over and above these rates.

We were invited, by a delegate of the men who refused to work, to attend a meeting which was held in a large dwelling room in which wooden benches had been placed. The spokesman of the discontented mechanics was our party comrade Fähnrich of Oberschoneweide. He said that 80 of the men wanted to go back to Germany; 69 of these were present and the 11 others were at work. Of those present, 40 were members of the Independent Socialist party of Germany, 16 of the Communist party, and six of the Communist Labor party. Ten were not members of any party, but of these eight belonged to trade unions. He asserted that they had been lied to and deceived by the emigration agents. The Russian government refused to allow them to return. Their food was so bad they could not live upon it. Several were already in the hospital, suffering from intestinal hemorrhages. Fähnrich said:

"We shall starve here. The bread is bad and unpalatable; it is full of chaff. In all other respects our condition is miserable. We had to live for four days in freight cars without even blankets. After we were herded here, in the houses we now occupy, we were eight days without even straw. We must do a full day's work and in addition perform all our own household duties. We are being vilified and abused as 'invaders' and 'counter-revolutionists.' When I tried to sell a few sewing needles in the market yesterday for one ruble apiece—and they usually sell anywhere from 20 to 50 rubles—in order to get some money to buy additional provisions, I was arrested and not released for a considerable period. A formal indictment is said to have been drawn up against me, alleging that I have made 120,000 rubles in speculation. There is no real communism here at all; whatever the system is, it is good for nothing."

Comrade Grimm of Plauen spoke to the same general effect. He had left his own house and garden in Germany. He was told that he would have no use for money in Russia and therefore brought only eight pfennige with him. He found, however, that there was no place where a man needed money more than he did in Russia; for otherwise one could not get even the simplest and coarsest food. The bread and soup served them was not fit to eat. Their hardships had so weakened them that they were in no condition to do a day's work. This speaker had been an active Socialist agitator for 35 years and had come to Russia to help to reconstruct the country and to further a world revolution. But hunger had stopped these fine plans.

The next speaker was Comrade Hartmann of Hamburg. He, too, criticized the representatives of the emigration societies bitterly and likewise the German *Shop Council Gazette,* which had given entirely false accounts of the situation in Russia:

"We were told that we would be brought to a point near Moscow, to a factory in the forest, which we would manage all by ourselves. Our families would be provided for until they likewise arrived. The Russian workmen have to wear

leather garments and the bourgeoisie goes about in rags. I was present when we had the interview with the authorities in Moscow. They had no knowledge of any agreement with us. They promised us food until we got back to the German frontier. We have been waiting for two weeks, however, without transportation being provided. The Russian Government is incompetent. We dare not take the responsibility of bringing our families here. We want to get back to Germany.''

Fähnrich said in a second speech that further emigration from Germany must be prevented. If their families were already on the way to Russia, they were probably suffering great distress. The passports of the men who had arrived had been taken away by the Russians, and they did not know where they were. Their wages were not sufficient to support them. What did 11,000 or 12,000 rubles a month mean when a pound of butter cost 3,500 rubles, and all other food, including potatoes, was correspondingly dear? They were completely isolated. They could not send as much as a letter back to Germany.

I was the first member of our delegation to speak, and I told them that when we first met them on the steamer, we feared that they were going to be bitterly dissappointed. If they had listened to the advice of our party and of the Russian delegate in Berlin, they would not have got into such trouble. Before German working people can help in the reconstruction of Russian industry, certain preliminary conditions must be created. It is impossible for German workmen to live the way Russian workmen live, especially at the present time. Three years of blockade of Russia by Germany, followed by the Entente blockade, the war, and the counter-revolution, had all combined to create a condition of distress in Russia, unendurable for German working people in spite of the great hardships to which they had become accustomed during the war and blockade. Russian agriculture was prostrate, and the transportation system was a wreck.

The struggle with the counter-revolution and the Entente continues. Germans should have appreciated from the first how desperately the Russian people had to fight for a mere existence. When we told these things in Germany we were not believed. The great part of the Russian peasantry has failed to coöperate in reconstructing the country and is mentally incompetent to take the initiative in that direction. The outcome has been an absolute dictatorship in Russia. Any man who seeks to assist in restoring the material prosperity of the country under Soviet rule, must be ready to accommodate himself to unusual conditions and to tolerate a multitude of disagreeable things. No immediate alleviation of the country's deep distress is possible. German workers can hardly survive in Russia until commercial intercourse between their own country and Russia is restored, so that during a transition period they may receive provisions and other necessaries of life from home. In concluding I promised to take up their case at Moscow, particularly to secure an improvement in their ration if possible and an opportunity for those who wished to return to Germany to do so.

Comrade Däuming followed me, agreeing with what I had said. The Joint Committee of Emigration Societies had awakened hopes which had not been fulfilled. His hearers must not forget that the Russians were recently serfs, "two-legged animals," and that the despotism of the Tsars, and the world war, and the civil war, had created lamentable conditions in their country. A German could not eat the native bread, which looks very much like a piece of compressed turf.

Comrade Crispien emphasized the many difficulties with which Soviet Russia was struggling, and the great suffering which the proletariat must inevitably submit to during the transition to Socialism. Men of strong wills and bodies should try to hold out. Russian workmen are not as well fed as the German newcomers. They are in still greater want. (Interruption: They bring food from the villages). Crispien promised likewise to take the case of the workers up with the government at Moscow.

Our Russian Comrade Makaroff, one of the managers of the factory, then delivered a speech in Russian, part of which was interpreted for us. The part which we thus obtained showed that the speaker was an utter stranger to the ideas and sentiments of our German working people, and his remarks evoked wrathful interruptions from them. He tried to make the discontent of the German workers appear unfounded. He said that conditions were better in Russia now than in the days of the Tsars:

"The Russian workingman lives under distressing conditions. If you are better treated and are made a privileged class, it will cause great discontent among the Russians. Cease to think only of your own welfare. (Shouts of indignation.) Look around you, there are many fine things here. We are fighting a war against two fronts; against Poland in the West and Wrangel in the South. We are sending our best men to the battle line. Our best mechanics and artisans are already there. Poland has been defeated. When we win the final victory, conditions will rapidly improve at home. Do not make revolutionary demands in the midst of such a crisis. Only counter-revolutionists and members of the bourgeoisie (great agitation in the audience) who refuse to understand the revolution, will demand privileges at a time like this. You ought to be helping us and you sit here and do nothing. (Shouts: Not in that factory, but we are willing to work.) Our best comrades are at the front. Most of the men working here now are country clowns. They work twelve hours and many a man faints at his post. (Calls: They have to work! They are forced to at the point of the bayonet. Otherwise they would be sent to prison.) That is not true. (Calls: It is true.) We use force only against men who refuse to labor. No work, no bread. I am surprised that you are not willing to work, that you are not willing to help the revolution. (Calls: You see we are 'counter-revolutionists.') What do you want? Does each man of you need his own leader? (The interpreter used the milder word 'leader' instead of 'nursemaid' as the speaker said.) Get rid of your bourgeois prejudices once for all, work with us Russians. (We want to get back home.)''

Comrade Stoecker intervened and tried to allay the excitement. He interpreted the feelings of the German workmen as the effect of their first disappointment, of the intense heat, and of their intellectual isolation. This state of mind was abnormal, and would pass away. (By that time we'll

be dead of starvation). When they realized how much Russia was accomplishing they would say: "By Jove, we must stick it out."

After that several of the German workingmen made short speeches. Ostbahr of Hamburg asserted that they had but one wish, to get back to Germany. Baumgarten of Berlin said, that weakened as they were by the late war and blockade, they could not endure such hardships as they were encountering in Russia and must get home. Fleischer of Berlin insisted that they would not change their minds. They were going back to Germany. Crispien of our delegation spoke. We promised them again to do all in our power in their behalf and left with the farewell: *Auf Wiedersehen in Deutschland.*

At the next session of the Executive Committee of the Third International, the last of which we took part, I referred to the matter in my remarks. Zinovieff, chairman of the Executive Committee, and likewise Radek and Bukharin agreed with my view of the case, and promised to see that situation of the workers improved, and that those who wished to do so be allowed to return home. While we were returning from the Kremlin to our hotel about midnight, several German workmen accosted us on the street. There were seven of them who had got to Moscow from Kolomna by stealing rides on the railway. They told us that the men who refused to work had been placed on starvation rations. They had been forbidden by the local militia to participate in any of their communal tasks. The next morning I accompanied Comrade Stoecker and one of the workingmen, Scholz of Berlin, to the Russian Minister of Labor, Schmidt, to ask for relief. The Minister himself was away, and his assistant spoke only Russian. A young comrade who knew German and had already visited the German workers at Kolomna interpreted for him. He was one of the men who had berated the Germans as "counter-revolutionists" and "white-guardists." In our conversation he showed total lack of comprehension of what the situation required. For instance, he remarked: "We cannot discriminate in the least in our treatment of Chinese coolies and German workingmen." Under these circumstances I felt compelled to bring the matter again before the Executive Committee, but was unable to find Zinovieff at the Kremlin until evening. There he promised me, as did Radek and Bukharin, to do all in their power to relieve the situation of the German workmen immediately.

I do not know what happened later in Petrograd. I heard that one of the seven men who had reached Moscow had managed to steal rides as far as Petrograd, and that he had said that unless arrangements were speedily made to bring back the others from Kolomna, they would all endeavor to get away in the same manner. I hope our Russian comrades have kept their promise and that transportation home is being provided for these men before the Russian autumn comes with its unbroken rains, or winter with its snow and barbarous cold.

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